

Community Assistantship Program

Omega Food Cooperative Report

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Omega Food Cooperative Report

Conducted on behalf of
Pine Island Economic Development Authority

Prepared by
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University of Minnesota
January 2001

CAP Report 016

CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION

**Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota
330 Harmon Hall**

January, 2001

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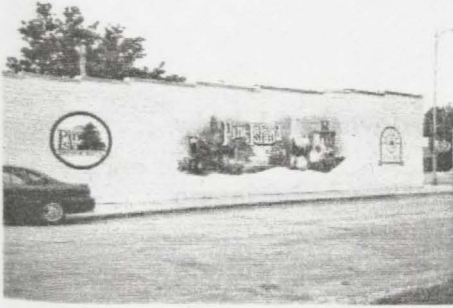
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Executive Summary



I started my first day with the Omega Cooperative on June 5, 2000. Three members of Omega and myself, after my hour and a half drive from the “mega cities,” met at Whispering Pines – the local family restaurant/coffee shop/gathering place located right on Main Street. We talked about what the group was trying to accomplish – this amazing concept of creating an **Alternative Food System focused on Sustainable and Local Values**. I was immediately fascinated knowing this concept could be a solution to so many problems within our current food system and within struggling rural communities. It seemed fairly basic in structure: connect local family farms directly with consumers in the community. These consumers would have a voice in what food they wanted to be produced while farmers who were feeding the community would receive equitable pay. Simple enough, yet if you read “Consolidation in the Food and Agriculture System,” prepared by Dr. William Heffernan, you will quickly begin to understand why creating an Alternative Food System is quite the daunting task.

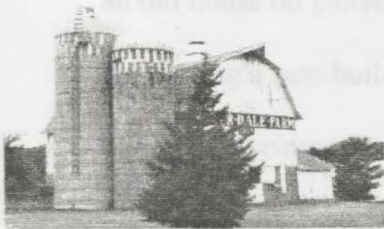
Here was a group with a vision. Here was a group that wanted to make a positive change that would have a lasting impact. Here were farmers who did not want to be forced to tell their kids to look for another profession. Instead of just more talk about problems in our society, this progressive group was offering solutions. It was brilliant. I was hooked.



During the initial meeting, we discussed my position with Omega for that summer. I knew three months would go by quickly, so I had to be realistic in my goals concerning what I could do for the group. It was decided that I would contribute to and edit Omega’s monthly newsletter, Omega Co-op News (copies of some of the editions in

which I was involved are included). I had previously worked on newsletters for other organizations and knew I would like this aspect of my assignment because I enjoy playing a role in keeping people informed and in encouraging communication.

Besides working on the newsletter, I visited local farms (getting very lost in the process!) and local businesses, attended a meeting at City Hall, biked a bit of the Douglas



Trail, became friends with locals, represented Omega at Minnesota's Third Annual Rural Summit, went to a meeting of the Experiment in Rural Cooperation, listened in at "A Conversation with Chef Parker Bosley," dug through file drawers

full of resources, redesigned Omega's web page (although I never did figure out how to actually *put* it on the web), helped assemble bags of high quality, locally grown food for low-income families and then helped distribute the food through the

Minnesota Food Association's Community Food Project, walked in the annual Pine Island Cheese Festival parade, and tried to ease disagreements and keep the fires of inspiration burning. They even did an article about my work in their local paper! I saw **really big** farm machinery tower over me, heard farmers sighs of frustration at a panel of "experts" touting the

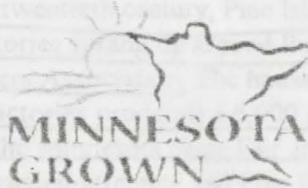


joys of Genetically Modified Organisms, and shook my head when I saw that Monsanto had stolen the word *sustainability*... all at Farm Fest. I was housed and fed by numerous generous folk throughout my time in the southeastern Minnesotan town of Pine Island (population: a bit over 2,000). I drove many miles to this town I never even heard of before to work with a group of people I will never forget.



This internship, offered through the Community Assistantship Program, immediately interested me for numerous reasons. I have spent much of my time, while attending the University of Minnesota, living in a housing cooperative and have been so grateful for everything that I have been exposed to through this unique living situation. We (twenty-seven housemates and myself) manage the day-to-day aspects of maintaining an old house on University Avenue, as well as the long-term necessary duties like purchasing a new boiler so our home stays warm through the Minnesota winters. We use our collective monetary resources to support things we believe in: we purchase fresh, organic produce weekly from a local cooperative grocery store and receive yummy fruits and veggies during the warmer months through our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares in the Easy Bean Farm Community. Also, having recently completed a degree in International Business from the Carlson School of Management, I hoped that the knowledge I had acquired could somehow be useful in helping efforts to build sustainable communities.

Finally, I was attracted to this project because of what I had witnessed during a year of study in France. Europe is much more regionally focused than we are in the States. In France, food is a reflection of where you are. Here, we can get any kind of food, anywhere, at any time. While most of us seem to realize the importance of buying locally to keep our communities vibrant, it can be quite the challenge to maintain this value. As one farmer I worked with put it, buying food from your local Minnesota farmer is "2,000 miles fresher."



PINE ISLAND

HISTORY AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The first permanent settlers came to Pine Island in 1855. The Post Office was established a year later. Pine Island derived its name from the Indian word Wa-Zu-Wee-Ta, meaning Isle of Pine. A forest of white pines grew on a narrow strip of land on the south side of the Zumbro river, extending from Main Street to and on top of the bluff west of the village. The Dakota Indians viewing this acreage from afar in the winter decided the forest of green trees in the snow resembled an island in a sea. A popular interpretation of the name came from the fact that in the river running through the village there was an island upon which grew a pine tree. However, old residents say that this island was caused by excess water from the mill race. Therefore, the village could not have received its name thus, as it was called Pine Island by the Indians long before the mill race existed.

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, Pine Island became famous for its cheese production. Forty cheeses factories sprang up around Pine Island and each were a part of the Minnesota Cheese Producers Association. The houses of those early entrepreneurs are still in evidence. In 1911 the factories produced a 6,000 pound block of cheese, the world's largest, for display at the Minnesota State Fair and then at the World's Fair in Chicago. This large cheese attracted attention and Pine Island was then to be referred to as the "Cheese Capital of the World".

Pine Island is nestled among gently rolling hills in southeast Minnesota, Goodhue County on State Highway 52, a mere 15 miles northwest of Rochester, and about 55 miles south of the Twin Cities metro area.

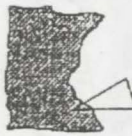
Pine Island grew from its agricultural roots. The dairy industry plays a large role in the community with its Land O' Lakes facilities. The local Farmers Elevator is very active and serves a large area around Pine Island.

While Pine Island has continues its close tie with its rural heritage, in the last twenty years the community has developed a second nature, namely as a community of professionals serving in the Rochester area medical and computer industries.

The community has grown over 20% in the preceding decade and we here in Pine Island expect it to continue to grow at this rate, while maintaining an excellent quality in all aspects of community life. The Pine Island area is consistently described as a particularly high growth area, specially with our proximity to Rochester and its job market.

PINE ISLAND

PINE ISLAND MINNESOTA



PINE ISLAND

Pine Island is located on the banks of the Zumbro River and was a favorite spot for the Dakota Indians. They called this area *Wa-zu-wee-ta*, or Island of Pines because a large stand of white pines stood between the two forks of the Zumbro and resembled an island. The first settlers arrived in 1855, when a saw mill was built to meet the needs of the new settlers. In 1878, the village was incorporated and the council had its first meeting.

The town of Pine Island is located on U.S. Highway 52, about 15 miles northwest of Rochester, home of the world Famous Mayo Clinic. The business district along Main Street houses some of the most unique historic buildings in the area; The **Opera House Block**, Pine Island City Hall and clock tower, and others built during the second half of the 19th century.

ATTRACTIONS

Douglas Trail is a 13 mile, multiple use state trail developed on the abandoned Chicago Northwestern Railroad grade. It provides two separate treadways, each of which is designed for different recreational activities. This trail offers outstanding rural scenery traversing some of the richest agricultural land in Minnesota. One treadway is surfaced with bituminous pavement for bicyclists, hikers, and snowmobilers; the other for horseback riders and cross country skiers. The completed trail begins at Pine Island City Park, travels through the town of Douglas (for which the Trail is named), and terminates in Northwest Rochester. Trail access from Pine Island includes parking and restrooms facilities. A quality nine hole golf course is open to the public. The course is located on the east side of Douglas Trail in the southeast section of town.

EVENTS

Pine Island Cheese Festival is held on the second weekend of June every year. The festival is free for the whole family and includes an Arts and Crafts Show, food booths, carnival, a tractor pull, and on Sunday the festival Parade.

Pine Island Farmers Market On Main Street Third Saturday of June through third Saturday of October every year.

For additional information contact:

Pine Island Economic Development Authority

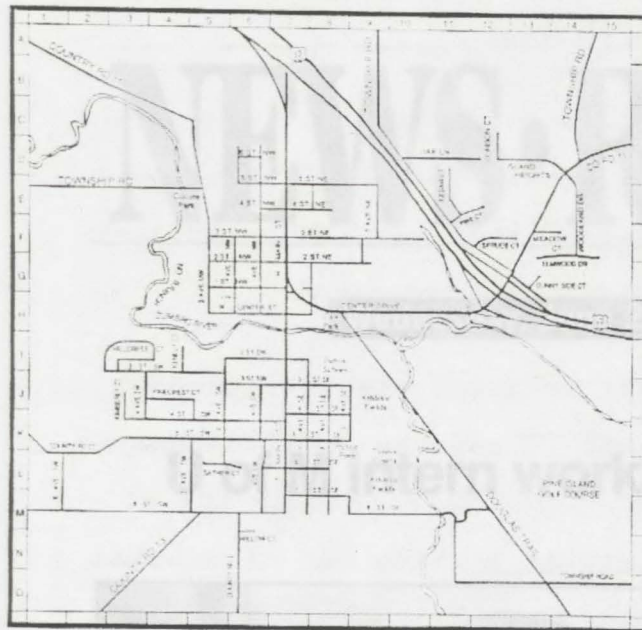
PIEDA

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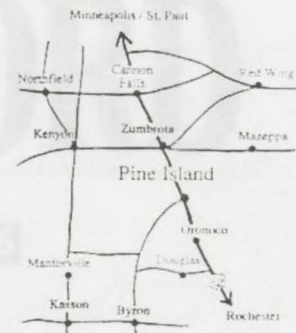
(507) 356-8103

PINE ISLAND



MINNESOTA

PINE ISLAND MINNESOTA



For Additional Information Contact:
Pine Island Economic Development Authority
Main Street Program
P.O. Box 715
Pine Island, MN 55963
(507) 356-8103



Walking in the parade



Working at the cheese booth

Sponsored by Pine Island Area Chamber of Commerce

64th Annual

Pine Island Cheese Festival

Friday, Saturday & Sunday

June 9, 10 & 11, 2000

Search for the
Golden Cheese Nugget!



* Cheese Festival Button required to become an official hunter for the "Golden Cheese Nugget" contest. Find the "nugget" and win \$250 cash!



Chees will be available daily starting with Tuesday, June 6 through Saturday, June 10 or until golden nugget is found.

Starting Tuesday, June 6, from 7-8 a.m. listen or daily clues on:



"The Official Cheese Festival Radio Station"

FRIDAY

Lunch & Craft Sale
10 a.m.-2 p.m. Senior Center
Entertainment starts at Noon
Sponsored by Senior Center

6th Annual Cheese Festival
Golf Tournament
Sponsored by Pine Island Golf Course
Pine Island Golf Course
Two Separate Tournaments
Morning: 2 Person Teams
Afternoon: 4 Person Teams
Shotgun Start at 8 a.m. & 1 p.m.
New Call for Hole-in-One on Hole #9
(Call Sponsored by Greenview Apts. Zumbina)

Food Booths & Cheese Festival
Information Booth
Open at 5 p.m. Main Street
Tickets, Buttons, Cheese Clubs, Food
Youthfest 11 Rock Bands

SATURDAY

10 a.m.-Noon
Live on the
Midway
FM 106.9

Food Booths & Information
Open 11 a.m.

Junior Kids Parade
1 p.m. at Pine Haven Care Center
Rehearsal at 11:30 p.m.

FAMILY BINGO
1 p.m.-11 p.m. American Legion

Merriam's Midway Shows
1 p.m.-Midnight
Kiddies Day
at Carnival
1 p.m.-6 p.m.
Reduced Ride Prices

SUNDAY

Pancake Breakfast
7 a.m.-Noon American Legion Hall

Food Booths & Information
Open 11 a.m.

Merriam's
Midway Shows
Noon-10 p.m.

Cheese Festival
Grand Parade 2 p.m.
Down Main Street from

NEWS • RECORD

Wednesday, June 28, 2000 • No. 26

U of M intern works with food co-op



Jennifer Kuyava

By Mary Bollman

PINE ISLAND — There's a new face around the EDA office the past few weeks. Jennifer Kuyava, a student of the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, is serving an internship of the Community Assistantship Program at the University.

Kuyava will be mainly working with the Omega Food Co-op as they develop their producers market here. She expects to help facilitate communication between producers and consumers, visit farms and listen to the ideas of both farmers and townspeople.

She grew up in the Minneapolis suburbs, but she has an appreciation for the rural community, gained over the years by study in France, and her undergraduate courses in international business. "I can understand the benefits of local ownership and production and how we need to support our rural community," she stated.

She also knows many people are concerned about various additives in their food, explaining, "The way for consumers to know what they're eating is to buy it directly from the producer."

Kuyava also has experience with cooperatives, as she lives in one at the University; this type of living, with 24 people in a large old house, spurred her interest in co-ops in general. The house also is involved with bulk food purchases and aims for mostly organically grown foods.

Look for Jennifer around Pine Island Mondays and Tuesdays. Omega Co-op is on the Internet at www.omegacoop.com.

What is a Co-operative?

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity.

In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others.



The International Principles of Cooperation:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training, and Information
6. Cooperation among Cooperatives
7. Concern for Community

~International Co-operative Alliance ICA

Adopted in Manchester (UK)-23 September 1995

Pine Island: a town full of co-ops



Pine Island's Co-operative Golf Course



The Co-operatively run Greenway gas station and convenience store

*The local Farmers' Elevator
—
Farm Country Co-op*



The OMEGA Concept

Organized Marketing through Ethical General Access

The Omega concept is a plan for an alternative food system. This plan is presented as a model for the possible creation of an alternative food system targeting principally the lower metropolitan corridor of South Eastern Minnesota with Rochester being its center. The purpose here is to identify areas for democratic debate surrounding the need and possible implementation of such a system. The plan is based on a SARE report *Adding Values To Our Food System: An Economic Analysis of Sustainable Community Food Systems* prepared for the USDA SARE program by Integrity Systems Cooperative Co. 7101 Goodwin Road, Everson, Washington 98247. Other related material includes a report to the National Farmers Union by Dr. William Heffernan, Dept of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, entitled *Consolidation in the Food and Agriculture System*. Concepts in this plan are supported by an article in the July 1999 issue of ACRES titled *Feeding the Village First*, by Fred Kirschenmann.

- **Background**

The profit margins for most farms have continued to decline as production costs rise and commodity prices plummet even lower. Attrition of farm families is the result of an ever-decreasing percentage of the food dollar going to the producer. Many seek survival by multiplying declining profit margins over more units of production. **This concentrating of production under the control of fewer and fewer producers leads to an imbalance in the social well being of the community.**

The conventional wisdom tells food producers that to compete they must become least cost producers by multiplying fixed costs over more units of production. The law of supply and demand no longer works to regulate the price for most commodities. Control has shifted to a few large corporate vertically integrated food companies. There are few if any profitable independent producers left in enterprises such as broilers and hogs. The broiler industry has become the paradigm that food industry giants push commodities toward. As more and more producers turn to contract production to finance expansion or high tech improvements in their bid to survive, the market settles into a continuous bottom, which is at or below the cost of production. Only those who are large enough to avoid the open market and control the system from conception to the consumer will likely survive under this system. If small to medium farms wish to stay viable, they will need to find ways to secure a greater portion of the food dollar for themselves. **As more family farms fail, the small businesses that depend on them also fail, turning rural communities into ghost towns.** The Industrial System and a cheap food policy have worked to destroy the quality of life for rural communities.

- **The need for a strategic plan**

As our nations forefathers entered into what must have seemed to be an unattainable revolution they soon realized they would have to set aside political and personal differences. By coming together and defining what they had in common they were able to set forth a declaration of commonality and needs that still defines our nation.

While not everyone envisions the creation of an alternative food system based on values and an equitable treatment of all within the system as a revolution, any success will be dependent on a planned rather than a haphazard effort. Communication and tolerance will have to replace the mind-set that those who think differently are wrong. Anyone who cannot place personal or small group preferences aside for the common mission and the common good will bring more derision than purpose to any effort. Any decision based on a short-term crisis rather than a long-term plan will most likely not be sustainable or equitable. The opposition is formidable, having risen to their position of dominance through both sound business principles and the willingness to exploit any possible profit position. Many of these large food industry giants seek acquisitions and alliances which afford them complete control over the entire food system involving the selected commodities. Such control assures us that there is no such thing as an open market for these commodities.

Without a plan, without coordination, without cooperation and a willingness to bend and accept different ideas or viewpoints, no sustained effort can succeed. **Defining the shared values which exist within a region and then basing a food production and marketing system on those shared values, along with an equitable treatment of all participants needs to be the overriding goal of a sustainable community.**

While it is true that individuals must look out for their own, and their families needs first, they must also maintain their community to assure quality of life. It is also vital that the local community must serve and help to prosper its own first, and then seek to serve the greater community. Any economy that seeks to market its resources wholesale as a least-cost global provider of commodities and then purchase its needs in the free market as value-added products, has a bleak future. Planning designed to assure that members of the local economy have the first option on serving the local community needs keeps dollars circulating locally while creating an economy that is at least 3 or 4 times greater than where everything is exported raw and imported in finished form.

The purpose of this planning then would be to identify the needs and wants of the community, and then to determine what needs can be met locally. The creation or rebirth of local processing industries designed to provide the highest quality products based on the needs of the local citizenry, will likely be the types of products sought out by those seeking alternatives to bland mass production.

Planning based on tying together all the aspects within the community which effect the quality of life is the type of strategic planning needed to assure quality and equality for the whole community. Holistic plans must be grounded first in communication. **Unless the people who are the community can be made aware of the needs and concerns of their fellow members and come to realize the importance in maintaining the economic health of the whole community, they will only seek to satisfy their needs on a sticker price basis.** Communication is the only means by which the community can learn to make decisions on what is best for everyone on a long-term basis, and not just the lowest price.

All factor thinking is contrary to the message sent through the media by the national advertisers. **Positive information designed to encourage citizens of the local community to consider their local economy, environment, health issues, resources and all other factors affecting their quality of life must be promoted.** The community must be brought to realize the best way to assure the best quality of life is not through government regulation of problems but through the support of those who seek to provide services without creating a problem.

- ***Building a Bridge***

The Omega concept is based in the building of two cooperatives as a link between all the members of the food system. A producers cooperative to assist those interested in being the providers of natural products with production and marketing, and a consumers cooperative to help members access the types of products they desire produced in a manner that is consistent with their values. Communication is the key for both of these cooperatives in accomplishing their goals.

Unless the producers can determine exactly what their customers want, their motives, and the extent they would be willing to support products produced to their specifications, producers will be unable to compete for any significant share of the market. Unless consumers become active in their food system they will lose choice. If only a handful of food giants control the entire food system, there will be little incentive to provide better products or any method for determining competitive pricing.

Creating a system based on equality and shared values will provide the sustainability sought by many people. The democratic form we as a nation espouse is predicated on an informed public. **Without knowledge of what is involved in bringing food to the table, such as the effort, costs, and the pressure to mass produce food, the buyer is unable to estimate the value of alternatively produced food.** With a narrow control of the market, no competitive bidding system for determining value exists, and no profitable open market can be sustained. Since most contract prices are based on the open market, contract agreements can only lower product values. Only an arbitrated pricing system driven by fair play, and supported by the desire for a sustainable system and community, can provide equality once open markets fail.

Getting diverse people from all different perspectives working together for sustainable communities, requires an understanding of the others position. Without this understanding there is no incentive not to take advantage of others or the environment. This is why communication is the key, or perhaps more graphically stated, as the engine necessary to drive the sustainable, community food system based on values.

- ***Designing a model***

By designing a model of a possible working system, one is better able to foresee the potential needs and problems. One begins by assembling the tools for construction of such a model. From previous work it is known that there are approximately *one-quarter of a million people living within the target market. The number is higher if the area is extended further to include part of the metro proper.* It is also known that a percentage of

these residents have what is considered a good income level. This applies especially to those working in the medical and technology professions near Rochester. There is also a *significant transient population estimated at 1.5 million per year*. There is also the sale of goods to those who come to the area to shop or vacation and the possible sales by other means such as mail etc... The diversity of landscape within the region dictates that large portions of land are not suitable for large-scale crop monoculture farming. A more diversified farming culture has been used in the past and could again be used if it were locally supported.

First steps include determining what the potential consumers think of the food system they have now, their awareness of the changes that are coming under a more global system, and what support they would be willing to extend to an alternative local system based on their values. This information could then be used to identify the local producers that would be interested in growing food for this local value based system. Today, much of the food is consumed away from home, and in some value-added or prepared form. Discovering the identity of local and regional value-adders interested in being part of the system is necessary. The audit of existing and unused or underutilized local processing infrastructure must also be completed. These are suggested as being the first necessary steps in determining the potential scope of the system.

It is difficult to determine an effort's final direction without a detailed survey of needs and wants. Without the survey there is no way of knowing the form of an alternative food system. It is possible to suggest ideas on what such a system might look like. The two cooperatives and how they would interact to represent the main parts of the system is one such proposal.

The creation of an arbitrated, contract price discovery system is likely one of the most important yet controversial concepts that will need to be worked out. A communication system including both print and electronic forms will provide the groundwork for understanding among members. This will form the basis for research and development and the level and timing of production needs.

The creation of a common identifiable cooperative philosophy and brand symbol will assure the consumer of the quality of the purchased products. A good, better and best classification of products will assist producers in their transition to natural production. This will give access to cooperative products to all consumers, regardless of their income level.

The exact form of product distribution throughout the system can only be developed from preferences over time, with all opportunities being considered. The products will be targeted for the institutional, health, education, and restaurant markets. Promotion of our region to visitors is also a viable product. Their reason for visiting our area may well be for medical purposes or simply as a tourist.

One vision for the twin cooperatives is a Regional Marketing Center located along the Hwy 52 corridor promoting the products and values of our region to the world. A local

regional investment fund may be developed, so that those who have benefited from the recent strength in the economy have the opportunity to bring some of the gains back to their community.

Our possibilities are endless, limited only by our imagination and our willingness to cooperate!

- *Summary*

An alternative food system providing consumer based natural foods is believed to be the best way to return profitability to the local agricultural economy and save our small communities. Through the creation of a local network of producers, growers, and processors committed to providing healthy products, combined with a consumer network committed to sustaining their local communities, an alternative food system could be developed.

Many more consumers would chose a healthier choice, and be willing to pay a premium for such foods so long as they were convenient and fast. If value-added food products that assure the consumer of their healthfulness could be provided to the consumer for home use as well as to food venders and institutions, the demand for such products should be enormous. **Providing natural foods, craft products, and ecological services to the public by local rather than global entities will help to educate people to the need to support their local economy.** These people are the ones who share and effect their daily lives and local environment. Adopting one shared brand or label system designed to assure the high quality and healthfulness will instill confidence and brand loyalty.

We can build a better system! One that produces sustainable naturally balanced food, one that provides a consistent supply to local processors and value-adders for naturally healthy products, and one that provides consumers a local choice in a convenient and value priced manner. Such a system must be based in ethical values, and convey the knowledge that **true cost can not be measured in price alone, but in the positive or negative effects ones actions have on the quality of life.** It must provide the means for communicating the concerns and needs of everyone within the system.

Risk in agriculture is inevitable. **For without it there is no opportunity. Continuation of a cheap food policy by allowing the Global Industrial Complex to have complete control will destroy the rural economy. Capitalism without values is nothing but greed!** As margins are squeezed to nothing, values are forgotten, and survival makes the irrational an entitlement. A food system with accountability only to corporate profits is a poor steward for things such as food, our health, and our environment. As conventional agriculture gives way to domination by the Global Industrial Complex, there appears little future for small to medium farms, and the small business community that depends on them. Finding an alternative to the Global Industrial System that has a competitive chance would seem a top priority for all who care about the sustainability of our farms, our communities, our environment, our Quality of life!

Why buy locally grown food?



When family farms prosper, everybody prospers.

- fresher food
- fewer chemicals
- lower energy costs
- less dependent on fossil fuels
- saves farmland
- strengthens our community

Taking control of our food supply

Three percent of the farms in the U.S. supply 75 percent of the nation's food.²



Ninety percent of all fresh vegetables consumed in the United States are now grown in the San Joaquin Valley of California.³



The average item on the grocery store shelf has traveled more than a thousand miles to get there.⁴

² USDA, 1993. Cooperative State Research Service. *Small-scale Agriculture Today*. Spring.
³ *The Practical Farmer*, 1994, Vol. 9 (3).
⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, 1969. "US Agriculture: Potential Vulnerabilities." Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, CA.

Strong community, lovely setting

Buying locally strengthens our community. In a 1997 study conducted by Dr. Larry Swain of UW-RF, it was found that farmers spend 75% of their money locally, and that a single medium-sized farm has a local economic impact equal to 8.3 households.



Buying locally grown food helps keep local farmland valuable as farmland. Not only is it beautiful--farmland costs our community far less in services than it would if it were developed for houses. A 1998 study done in the town of River Falls found that residential land cost the town from nine to eleven cents for every tax dollar it paid. Ag/forest/open space land paid from 30 to 46 cents in taxes for every dollar it cost the town.⁵

⁵ *Fiscal Impacts of Land use and Use Value Assessment on the Town of River Falls, Wisconsin*. Jan Riemersma. UW-RF, 1998.

The current food production and distribution system expends 10-15 calories of energy for every one calorie of energy produced.⁶



In 1973, 21 cents of every food dollar was spent on manufactured foods. In 1987 it was 41 cents. Following current trends, the figure will be 90 cents in the year 2000.⁶

Only about 10 percent of the fossil fuel energy used in the world's food system is used in production, the other 90 percent goes into packaging, transportation, and marketing.⁷

⁶ Joan Dye Gussow, 1991. *Chicken Little, Tomato Sauce & Agriculture: who will produce tomorrow's food?* New York: The Bootstrap Press.
⁷ Robin B. Mather. "Redignifying Food" in *Conscious Choice*, September/October, 1995.
⁸ Geoff Tansey and Tony Worsley, 1995. *The Food System: A Guide*. London: earthscan Publications Ltd.

Local growers, local economy

River Falls started as a farming town, and your local growers carry on that tradition. We tend smaller plots with greater care and fewer chemicals to provide fresher, healthier fruits and vegetables than the agribusiness giants can ever hope to grow.



Our children attend the local schools, we hold jobs in the area, we shop at local stores. We care about the land and the local economy.

When you buy our produce, you purchase fresh food that is healthy for you and your family. You also support the local economy and the beauty of our rural landscape. You become a vital part of a stronger community.



A farmer must produce and sell 104 pounds of corn to buy a 25-ounce package of frosted flakes, 93 pounds of potatoes to buy a three-ounce package of potato skins covered with cheese.⁸



We strengthen our community and preserve our farmland when we support our local growers!



Brochure⁹ prepared on behalf of River Falls growers by:
 Munten Ash
 Baldur Farm
 N7659 950th St. (Cady Lane)
 River Falls, WI 54022
 Certified organic potatoes and garlic
 Suffolk Punch Draft Horses

⁸ "Just Another Outrage." *Michigan Farmers Union Newsletter*, October-November, 1991.
⁹ Information taken from a publication by Madison Area Community Supported Ag. Coalition.

Taken from a brochure I picked up while shopping at North Country Co-operative in Minneapolis, MN

OMEGA Co-op News

June 2000

Volume 2, Issue 5

*SIDE
VIEW*

Update!

We apologize for not getting a May Newsletter out, but with it being spring work and so many things going on at OMEGA we hope you understand and forgive us. We have a graduate student from the University helping us part time this Summer through the CAP Program. Her name is Jennifer and with her help communications should go better the next few months.

A lot has happened since our last letter, especially in the last few days. The Farmers' Market opened on June 10th. On the 11th we had a horse-drawn entry in the Pine Island Cheese Festival parade and took a turn at the Chamber of Commerce booth.

On the 13th the first of two Community Food Project distributions was completed in Faribault. This was an opportunity that grew well beyond our expectations. THANK YOU MINNESOTA FOOD ASSOCIATION for asking us to participate.

We have received funding through the MDA to have our proposed Bylaws go through a legal review. We are currently calling various recommended law firms before deciding with whom we will work.

Our effort to have research done by the University itself in a timely manner has fallen through, but an agreement was reached to use a portion of the funds allocated to the Foods Group to have SNG RESEARCH do an expanded effort. SNG met with us, and some of the other interested groups, on the 12th and should get back soon with a proposal.

Thank you Minnesota Food Association !!

Last of all, please note that we have begun taking applications for voting membership. We are considering using order of membership when allocating production contracts. Therefore, when you join may become important. If you are interested, please let us know so we can get you a copy of the proposed Bylaws and a membership form.

Thank You,
Rod Sommerfield

by Bill Beckman

Your cooperative is entering a long awaited phase. We are about to start the market research in greater Rochester and surrounding area. The research is being expanded to include some ideas submitted by others in the University food group. We look forward to the completion of this study.

We are entering into new activities which may lead to future contracts for production. It is likely that new wants and services will be identified, to be provided by members of the cooperative. If you are interested in participating in these potential projects, you will need be a member of the cooperative.

The cooperative proposed by-laws are currently being submitted for legal review. We feel this is necessary and judicious.

If you are interested in joining OMEGA Cooperative, please drop us a line or give a call and we will send you a copy of the bylaws as well as an application form. It is exciting to watch the cooperative build and offer services. Together we can make great things happen. Won't you come join us??

* Farmers' Market *

Thursdays ~ 4 - 8pm

Saturdays ~ 8am - Noon

(At the Creamery near the Douglas Trail by the Park and Ride)

We are looking for more vendors. The cost per market day is \$5 for OMEGA members and \$10 for non-members.

Current participants include Lori Callister with chicken and beef, Tom Kraetch with bison, Jerry Unger with vegetables, Glen Merhkens with berries and vegetables, and Doris Schleusner with bedding plants, vegetables, berries, soap, and popcorn.

Student Intern

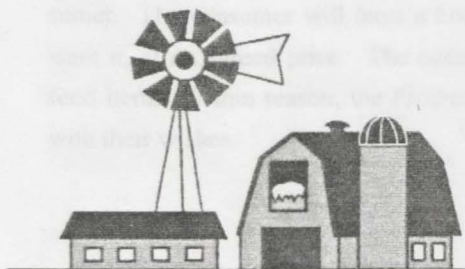
Jennifer Kuyava is the new student intern for OMEGA. She is a student at the University of Minnesota and recently completed coursework for a degree in International Business.

She feels very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with the OMEGA Co-op. Jennifer is a supporter of sustainable agriculture, organic farming, as well as ecology in general. She plans to learn as much as she can while working with OMEGA and hopes she will be an asset to the Co-op.

Already, Jennifer has worked on OMEGA projects including the Consumer Brochure, the Community Food Project, and even this newsletter! She is also working with faculty from the University of Minnesota to gain information to assist OMEGA.

Jennifer is happy to be a part of OMEGA and looks forward to meeting you.

*Building an Equitable
Bridge between
Producers and Consumers*



Community Food Project

On June 13th and 19th farmers from the OMEGA Cooperative participated in the Community Food Project. Each of the two days in June served around 160 low-income families in the Fairbault area.

About fourteen farmers provided food to this project, which was the first project OMEGA has done as a co-op. The challenge was met with success and was a wonderful way for us to work together, especially for such a worthwhile cause.

Another Community Food Project is tentatively expected in the Fall.

Thank you to all those who participated.

Together we can
make great things
happen.

Along with this newsletter, we are sending a copy of the brochure we have been giving to potential consumers. We are in the process of starting the "sister co-op" and encourage you to be a part of the Consumers' Co-op as well. Please feel free to show the Consumer Brochure to anyone you think may be interested. Thank you.

The OMEGA Cooperative

Mission Statement:

It shall be the mission of this organization to assist its members in their search for sustainability. We seek to accomplish this through the creation of an *Equitable Food System for Southeastern Minnesota*; thereby helping to preserve and perpetuate a renewable lifestyle for all citizens of this region and beyond.

Goal:

Our goal is to join together to form the providers side of an *Equitable Alternative Food System*, so as to be able to provide the types of value-added products sought by our neighbors with whom we share values and concerns.

OMEGA Cooperative

P.O. Box 756

Pine Island, MN 55963

W

hat if you were given the opportunity to become an active participant in an **EQUITABLE LOCAL COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM**? A system where your **values, wants, and needs**, along with those of other members of the food system, are not just given consideration, but are required as a basis for arbitrating fairness - not just to the participants, but to the land and the generations to follow.

In Southeastern Minnesota, farmers are forming a cooperative. They desire to become the **Producers** in a system where they are paid equitably for their commitment to providing food in a manner that preserves the land. **A system where their farming supports the local communities** and keeps them not only viable, but healthy.

We are beginning the process of setting up the other side of the food system - the **Consumers**. We are seeking not only those who want access to food from an equitable food system, but also those who are willing to dedicate some effort toward setting the foundation of an Equitable Bridge between Producers



the only system that can compete. We alternative to the need for legislation just

We need people with vision who believe that the global system is not need people who can envision a lifestyle of participation as an

Here is an opportunity to **have a voice in how your food is produced**. Here is an opportunity to build relationships between those who produce your food: the farmers. Here is an opportunity to improve the community and the local economy, as well as your **quality of life**.

~ The Bridge ~

To help visualize the two cooperative concept, we often use the image of a bridge. One end is firmly planted in the agricultural community of SE Minnesota, with all the potential production possibilities. The other end is securely planted in the consumer pool which is currently envisioned to be Rochester and the surrounding area.



The two ends of the bridge are supported by values such as **trust, safe food, environmental concerns, community concerns, health, and equitable returns** for all concerned in the process.

~ The Consumer Cooperative ~

The members of the Consumer Cooperative will identify their needs and communicate them to the Producer Cooperative. Here, needs will be converted to fixed-price contracts for the product defined by the consumer. The consumer will have a known product, delivered when they want it, at an agreed price. The consumer has a **choice** to design their food items. Within reason, the Producer Cooperative will try to comply with their wishes.



- Ω If you want to be better informed and have a say in how your food is produced...
- Ω If you want to do something positive for future generations...
- Ω If you would like more information on this alternative food system and the Omega Co-op...
- Ω If you are interested in working with the farmers of the Producers' Cooperative in order to develop a food system that is consistent with your values...

Please cut out the box on the right and mail it to:

OMEGA COOPERATIVE

P.O. Box 756

Pine Island, MN 55963

507-356-8103

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: () _____

☐ I am interested in helping to form the Consumers Co-op.

Comments?

We would like to learn who may be interested in becoming part of an alternative food system. Sending this form does not commit you to joining the Omega Co-op.

Locally Grown

An alternative food system

Locally Grown

ΩMEGA CO-OP

Building an Equitable Bridge between Producers and Consumers

Please visit us on the world wide web at omegacoop.com

Locally Grown

Locally Grown

EQUITABLE BRIDGE

PRICE DISCOVERY & QUALITY CONTROL

Providers
Cooperative

Purchasers
Cooperative

FAIR RETURN

HEALTHY FOOD

COMMUNICATION NETWORK

CONCERNS & VALUES

Sustainability	Family	Community	Food Safety
Fairness	Trust	Ecology ?	Service
Land	Stewardship	Cost	Natural
Tradition	Conservation	Humane	Organic
Future	Profitability	Convenience	

OMEGA Co-op News

August 2000

Volume 2, Issue 6

Omega Co-op
106 SW 2nd Street
P.O. Box 756
Pine Island, MN 55963

A Conversation with Chef Parker Bosley

On Monday, July 31st, Omega intern Jennifer Kuyava attended an event sponsored by the Land Stewardship Project and the Community Design Center. The event was called "A Conversation with Chef Parker Bosley" and took place at the Farmers Community Park near Lewiston.

Chef Bosley was there to share his experiences as owner and chef of Parker's Restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio. Mr. Bosley has been a strong advocate of working directly with farmers. He has worked very hard to promote the use of seasonal, local, and organic foods.

At the event, participants discussed many important issues, all concerning food, of course! We talked about the need to educate customers, chefs, families, and nutritionists. We also discussed how other countries have different approaches to food. For example, in France food is always a reflection of where you are staying. It is much more regionally focused.

It was a wonderfully informative event. Thank you LSP and CDC!

Community Food Project

Checks have been cut and distributed to producers for the 1st Faribault Summer distribution. Partial payment has been sent out for the 2nd Faribault distribution and the rest is on its way. A lot was learned at the two Faribault Summer distributions which will help to move things along smoothly in the future.

In fact, the Minnesota Food Association has invited Omega to participate in the upcoming Fall distributions. We have already begun planning for this project in order to allow for adequate turnaround times for producers. This is a great project that brings farmers together with consumers. And it helps out the community at the same time!

Plans for the Fall distributions include:

- encouraging farmers to bring extra product to sell
- displaying information about the different farms
- some sort of entertainment

We thank all the producers who participated in the Summer distributions and look forward to working with you

again during the Fall distributions.

There are **4** Fall distributions (each with a possibility of up to 200 families!). The dates are:

September 26

October 17

October 24

and

November 7

All four of these distributions are on **Tuesdays** from **3-7 PM**

The most likely location will be the main armory in Faribault (not the armory where the second summer distribution took place) which is off of Hwy 60, however, the place is not yet confirmed

Jennifer's internship with Omega is coming to a close. It went by very fast. She enjoyed her time here in southeastern Minnesota. "It is amazingly beautiful here and the people are wonderful." She has learned a lot through her experience here and will use that knowledge in her future work.

If you need to contact Jennifer, please e-mail her at jenniferkuyava@yahoo.com

Thank you
LSP and CDC!

OMEGA has a new
e-mail address!

It is:

omegacoop@yahoo.com

We are just starting
to use this, so if you
need an immediate re-
sponse, please call us
at #507-356-8103,

or write us at

106 SW 2nd Street

PO Box 756

Pine Island, MN 55963

OMEGA Co-op News

Sideview

Update on Market Research!

by Bill Beckman

The market survey is about to begin! The current status is that the questionnaire has been developed and will be tested in the next few days. It is also being reviewed by the other members of the University Food Group.

We had asked the group for suggestions and several were received and incorporated into the questionnaire. If all goes well, the actual market survey

will be begin in about a week to ten days.

It will be some time before we know the results, but we will keep you posted through this medium. We are excited about this as it has been a long time coming.

We want to thank the Experiment in Rural Cooperation as well as the other members of the Food Group.

Omega Farmers' Market

Thursdays ~ 4 - 8 PM

Saturdays ~ 8 AM - Noon

At the Creamery near the

Douglas Trail by

the Park and Ride

Stop by and visit us!



2



A random farm

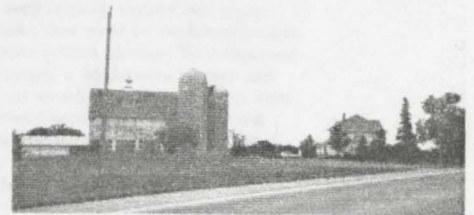
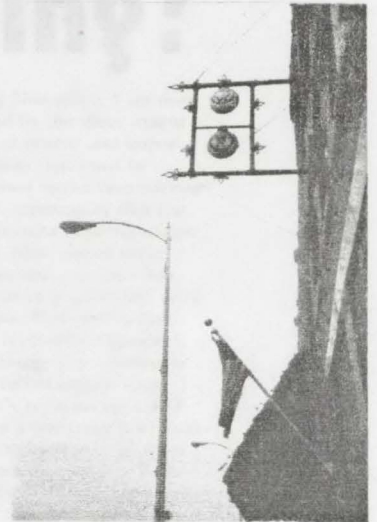
Scenes from around town



Sustainable Career in Local Farming?

By David M. Hoffman

For the last issue of the "Sustainable" column, we looked at the local food scene. In this issue, we'll look at the local farming scene. The local farming scene is a complex one, with many different factors at play. In this article, we'll look at some of the challenges facing local farmers and some of the ways they are trying to overcome them.



Wedge NEWSLETTER

CO-OP August / September 2000

Is There a Sustainable Career in Local Farming?

By David Washburn

In the last issue of the Wedge newsletter, I wrote an article explaining that Red Cardinal Farm was going to be taking a sabbatical from producing vegetables this farming season. The purpose of this sabbatical is:

- To sort out whether and under what conditions we would consider farming in the future.
- To rediscover the simple pleasures of summer (and life) that we had put aside because of the demands of farming.
- To attempt to contribute some useful insight and perspective to the challenge of creating/protecting a vibrant, sustainable local and regional food system made up of small and medium sized farms.

It has now been about 3 months since that decision was made and I can say with certainty that I have only begun to touch the surface of the reflective part of my sabbatical. I am definitely enjoying the summer, however. I've been to a cabin, read many books (not on farming), gone to several movies, been swimming frequently and have just plain enjoyed having my life "cranked down a couple of notches." My wife, Meg, and I have joined our friends Andy Gaertner and Jen Bush's, Natural Harvest CSA Farm to get our farm fresh produce. This has moved us squarely from food producer to food consumer status and the experience/perspective has been insightful. Most importantly, however, the food has been great.

As I begin my reflection on the



past 9 years of farming, identifying what has been sustainable and what hasn't been, I am beginning to see that my observations loosely fall into two categories: those that may be uniquely personal, and those that are structural to farming as a business.

By personal I mean those observations that wouldn't necessarily be true for other farmers because of their different personal values and beliefs. By structural I mean those things which are inherent to farming as a business activity, particularly as it pertains to our culture and food system at this point in time. For example, I have grown to hate what I call the "tyranny of the farming." From the time the growing season begins in March and

ends in early November, I am overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of urgent and important tasks that must be accomplished in the very narrow windows of opportunity that the short Minnesota growing season provides. Miss one of these windows and you can often "kiss that crop good-bye" until next year. Part of this observation is obviously personal, my loathing of an endless to-do list full of urgent items. I know it's personal because I have met a few (very few) local farmers who appear to be more Zen-like about this. In fact, earlier in my own farming career I actually "enjoyed" the challenge of "pulling off the impossible, against all odds." Now it just scares the hell out of me. Maybe farming is a young person's sport?

The structural part of this observation is that there actually are an awful lot of very critical, urgent and important tasks that must be performed within a short period of time. To compound the urgency, a Minnesota farmer can count on weather complications at critical times, like the two weeks of rain during this spring's planting season. Rarely does a season go according to plan due to the vagaries of nature. Local organic farmers even have more variables to contend with since they don't have chemicals to control insect and weed pests after the fact. Organic farmers need to work to prevent/avoid these problems in advance by utilizing special time-consuming cultural practices which only add to the already lengthy to-do list.

continued on page 4

Sustainable...continued from page 1

The structural characteristics of the nature of farming in the existing farm economy (the marketplace) create the rules of the game in which a local grower must play. If you attempt to play outside these rules you either aren't allowed to play on any significant level, or you get kicked out eventually. At least that is my fear and my experience to date.

The biggest rule in the game is price. At some point and somehow, fresh produce has become a commodity game. A carrot is a carrot is a carrot and though that isn't actually true (check with your taste buds), the marketplace increasingly treats it that way. It's the same way the marketplace treats coal or crude oil and other more obvious commodities. For the most part, the pricing for fresh produce sold in the midwest is established by large growers in the western U.S. Whether these large growers are organic or conventional (chemical), they operate under some significantly less restrictive structural constraints than do local organic vegetable/fruit growers and therefore, can price their produce lower as a result of their lower costs.

For example, a large Californian salad mix producer can grow all year by moving from the Salinas Valley in November and growing in the California desert until March or April, then move back up to Salinas. This one structural difference lowers the California growers' costs significantly. First, it allows them to make money with their salad mix infrastructure (tractors, harvesting equipment, washing/packing facilities, etc.) for all twelve months of the year. Here in Minnesota we get the "privilege of owning" and paying for

our infrastructure for 12 months but can only earn income from it for 4 months maximum.

Second, California growers, because of climate, can earn income from their land nearly 12 months by planting different crops at different times of the year. For example, the land in Salinas Valley that raised lettuce from March through November gets planted to broccoli during the winter. After the land in the desert is utilized for lettuce from November through March it gets planted to melons or cotton for the summer. In Minnesota we make land payments all year but only earn income for about four months. In the winter we store snow for free. Lastly, the twelve month Californian growing season allows large farmers to provide year round work for many of their employees. This means that those field workers with the skills and desire can advance their careers, move into increasingly responsible positions and ultimately retire from production agriculture after a multiple year career. Here in Minnesota my observation is that very few workers spend more than one or two seasons working on a farm, because of the seasonal nature, before moving on to a "real job." As a result it is nearly impossible for Minnesota farmers to build up the human capital and positive momentum that accrues to any enterprise that doesn't have high personnel turn over.

All of these structural advantages enjoyed by large California growers make them the low-cost producers, which allows them to sell for less. Their pricing then becomes the marketplace standard by which local growers are measured. Last year my partners and I had collected enough data, after 8 years of farming, to figure out our average

true costs. We learned thereby what fair pricing should be to cover our costs, earn a fair return on our investments, hire enough staff to spread out the work load and pay us and our employees reasonable wages. The result was that we would have to charge 20-30% more than our current pricing which in some cases was already 5-20% higher than the Californian pricing standard. At those prices I fear there wouldn't be a sufficient market for our produce. That's why I took a sabbatical so that I can scratch my head and try to figure out what's wrong with this picture.

Maybe there are options other than raising prices, or the current approach of having the farmer make up the difference by assuming high risk, unreasonable and unsustainable workloads, accepting poor income and receiving little or no return on investment. At this point I don't know of any others. That's why I appreciate the opportunity to write these pieces in the Wedge Newsletter in order to encourage the greater community to think about these issues. Less than 2% of the population is involved in growing food (we actually now have more prisoners than farmers in the U.S.). The consumer has the ultimate say over whether local, seasonal farming continues or goes the way of the corner grocery, shoe repair shops and millinery stores. In the meantime I will continue to enjoy summer and ponder whether or not I will get back on the horse that has thrown me.

Note: Washburn, Meg Anderson and their farming partner Everett Myers have supplied local, organic produce to the Wedge and other groups for the last 7 years. You can reach Washburn by email at: david@redcardinalfarm.com.

On Reciprocity

"Things constantly shape one another. The child teaches the mother while the mother teaches the child. By the same token, the pond shapes the dragonfly, and the dragonfly shapes the pond. The pond, and the richness of life that lives in the pond, depends on the dragonfly. Something supplies food for the fish in the pond, and at the same time, the water is purified by various forces of the gravel and the sand, and the whole symphony comes together. If any element drops out, everything else has to adjust. I just could not be what I am without everything else being what it is: life is never an isolated process."

The students of Confucius asked him once, after they had been with him for several years, if he could reduce his teachings to something very simple. He said, "I can reduce everything to one word: Reciprocity." If you take, you must give. Nothing is received unless there is a giving.

That's where we go wrong. We take from the soil without giving anything to the soil that it can use integrally. It gives us nourishment and we give it poisons. We should return to it nourishment, according to its mode. Everything needs to move in a circle of mutual influences, a giving and a taking. If we break that circle everything dies."

~ An interview with the writer Thomas Berry



soybeans



corn

"More and more I am convinced that, if there is any hope of saving our dwindling rural farm communities or conserving our precious air and water, it lies not merely in some new piece of legislation. There is no "magic elixir" that can be peddled by any politician that will make everything better. (This is not to say that some saner farm/environmental policy would not help!) We must continue to build connections between rural and metro and between farmer and consumer. If we wish to create a shared vision that will foster healthy farms, cities, town, rivers, children, air, etc... we must bridge the gap that exists between us. We cannot let anyone or anything, be it corporations, government, distance, or apathy cause this divide to grow. Our ability to change OURSELVES is our greatest asset in manifesting change in others."

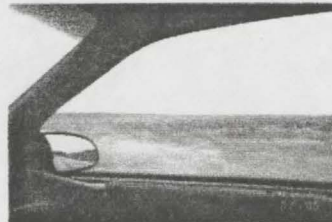
~ Mike Jacobs

Farmer of the Easy Bean Farm Community

One road leads to home



SE MN at 55mph



*I hope I was a good urban/rural ambassador to southeastern Minnesota.
Thank you to the Omega Cooperative and to everyone I worked with for your kindness
and generosity. I learned a great deal from all of you.
I very much appreciated this opportunity.
Best Wishes.*

Sincerely,

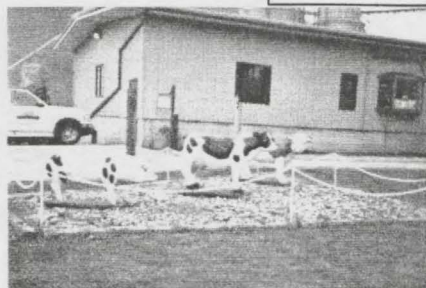
Jennifer Kuyava



Country cows



City cows



I welcome any questions or comments at jenniferkuyava@yahoo.com